

VZCZCXR05287

PP RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHDH RUEHIHL RUEHKUK
DE RUEHGB #2107 2171335
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 051335Z AUG 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAGHDAD
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 4213
INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 002107

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/05/2019

TAGS: KIRF PHUM IZ

SUBJECT: IRAQ'S ARMENIAN COMMUNITY: GREATLY REDUCED, BUT
MOVING FORWARD

REF: A. BAGHDAD 1426

1B. BAGHDAD 1288

1C. BAGHDAD 1890

Classified By: Political Counselor Yuri Kim for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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11. (C) The leader of Iraq's Armenian Community, Archbishop Avak Asadourian, tells us that the presence of Armenians in Baghdad has been greatly reduced since 2003, but that the Armenian Church continues to serve its remaining members. On August 5, Poloff traveled to the Armenian Cathedral in Baghdad to meet with Asadourian, who currently heads the Iraqi Council of Bishops, which has representatives from each of the 14 officially sanctioned churches in Iraq. Asadourian informed Poloff that the Cathedral is one of the ten Armenian churches currently operating in all of Iraq (four in Baghdad, two in Basra, one in Kirkuk, one in Mosul, one in Dohuk, and one in the village of Zakho). In response to Poloff's queries about the current size of the Armenian community in Iraq, the Archbishop said he could not be exact, but that it was roughly half of the 35,000 members that it had in 1980. When asked about the attendance at his Cathedral, Asadourian stated that before 2003 he had 800 parishioners attending Sunday Mass, but now the number was approximately 100. He also stated that attendance at the Armenian school which the church operated on the Cathedral grounds had been reduced from 387 students to approximately 150.

12. (C) The Archbishop noted that large numbers of Armenians had not left Iraq altogether, but rather had simply moved north, to the relative safety of the Kurdistan region. Poloff told the Archbishop that he had met with members of the Armenian community in Erbil in May (ref A) and commented that the 7,645 votes cast for the three Armenian political parties that participated in the July 25 Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) elections indicated that the Armenian presence in the KRG was substantial. (Note: One seat in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament was reserved for the Armenian community (ref B). End note.) The Archbishop commented that this number of votes seemed too large given his knowledge of the size of the Armenian community in the KRG region, but he was pleased that the Armenians now had a seat within the Kurdistan Parliament. In general, however, Asadourian was of the opinion that the Armenian community had no political agenda in Iraq because they already had their own homeland (Armenia).

13. (C) When Poloff asked the Archbishop about his relationship with the GOI, he answered that he had noted the Prime Minister's positive public statements concerning the status of Christians in Iraq, but stated that he had told the PM that "good intentions were not enough." At the same time, he told Poloff that he had studied with Vice President Abdel Ahmed Mahdi, former PM Ayad Allawai, and Ahmed Chalabi at the same Jesuit College in Baghdad (the school is no longer operating). With respect to the non-Muslim endowment (ref C), Asadourian said that the Armenian Church was receiving funds to build housing units for its priests, but that the church is relying primarily on its own endowments, which have

been provided by wealthy Iraqi Armenians over the years. He said that a group of Iraqi Armenians who had immigrated to the U.S. had recently sent a \$100,000 donation to the church, but also stated that he receives no financial support from Armenia itself. The Archbishop said that there were 175 needy families within the Baghdad Armenian community and that the church provided them monetary assistance at the end of every month.

Comment

¶4. (C) Iraq's Christian community has a strong and
Q4. (C) Iraq's Christian community has a strong and
politically well connected representative in Archbishop
Asadourian as the head of the Bishops' Council. In the past,
the Council has been reluctant to involve itself too directly
in Iraqi politics, although it did issue a statement
condemning the bombings of five Shia mosques on July 31. We
will continue to encourage Archbishop Asadourian and the
Council of Bishops to use its leverage as a united voice for
Iraq's Christian community to ensure that the GOI is taking
the necessary steps to address its concerns. End comment.

HILL